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THE OPERATIONS OF COMPANY "B", 715TH AMPHIBIAN
TRACTOR BATTALION DURING THE ASSAULT LANDING ON
SAIPAN ISLAND, 15 JUNE 1944
(MARIANAS CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of Company Commander)

Type of operation described: AMPHIBIAN TRACTORS LANDING
MARINES OF THE ASSAULT WAVES ON ENEMY BEACH

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ORIENTATION

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of Company B, 715th Amphibian Tractor Battalion, during the assault landing on Saipan Island, 15 June 1944.

Before outlining the general situation, it is believed that a brief description of the events in the Western Pacific up to this time will give the reader a better understanding of the operation to be described later in this monograph.

The conquest of Kwajalein and Eniwetok, Marshall Islands, in February, 1944, extended American control in the Central Pacific hundreds of miles to the west. (See Map A) (1) Being directly across our path north to the Japanese Empire and west to the Philippines, Formosa, and the coast of China, the Marianas formed a natural barrier of island whose location permitted the Japanese to stage land-based aircraft from the Empire and the Philippines to any island in the Western Pacific. It was therefore possible for the enemy to concentrate an offensive or defensive air force on selected islands in the chain and thus to provide shore-based air cover and support for a surface fleet operating within air combat range. Conversely the loss of these islands would mean a major break in the Japanese inner ring of defense, and provide us with sites for air bases and naval bases from which major strikes could be made against the heart of the Japanese Empire. Saipan was

(1) A-5, p. 211

selected as the first objective. Near the southern end of the chain it was the largest of the group which had been occupied by the Japanese since 1914. (See Map B) (2) Approximately twelve miles long and five miles wide, its seventy-two square miles of rugged terrain lent themselves well to the construction of underground fortifications in which the Japanese delighted, and the fringing reef lying close inshore around most of the island was a major hazard in the first and most difficult stages of an amphibious operation. It was not only the administrative capitol of the Marianas, but headquarters for Japan's Central Pacific Fleet and the best defended island of the group. An estimated 22,700 soldiers, plus about 7000 men of the Special Landing Force (the so-called Imperial Marines) were stationed on the island as a defense force. Two towns, Garapan and Charan Kanoa, both on the western side of the island would provide the first street fighting of the Pacific War.

THE GENERAL SITUATION

The over-all command of the task force assigned the mission of capturing Saipan was under Admiral Spruance, with Admiral Turner commanding the Navy Amphibious Forces and General "Howling Mad" Smith of the marines in command of all expeditionary forces. (3)

~~The attack on Saipan was to be made by the Second and Fourth Marine Divisions in the assault, with the Twenty-seventh Army Infantry Division in reserve afloat. The Seventy-seventh Army Infantry Division was to remain in distant reserve at Hawaii.~~

D-Day was set at 15 June. The plan of attack called for the two marine divisions to land abreast on a four thousand yard

(2) A-2, p. 173
(3) A-3, p. 43

stretch of beach along the western shore. The Fourth Marine Division would seize the town of Charan Kanoa and the beaches to the south as far as Nafutan Point, strike directly inland toward Aslito Airfield, pivot on its left flank and then attack up the eastern half of the island. The Second Marine Division would land on the beaches below Garapan, execute a wheeling ~~movement and attack up the western half of the island in con-~~ junction with the Fourth. (4)

MISSION OF THE 715TH AMPHIBIAN TRACTOR BATTALION

Before stating this mission, a brief description of this battalion is necessary to give the reader a background on this not too commonly known type of unit. At the time this operation took place the amphibian tractor battalion consisted of a battalion headquarters, a headquarters company and three letter companies; each letter company having three platoons. Each one of these platoons had ten amphibian tractors (M-2), commonly called alligators or water buffaloes, listed as LVT'S (Landing Vehicles Track), but more often referred to as Amptracs.

The primary role of this type unit with its special purpose vehicles, was to get the ground troops, and particularly the assault waves of infantry, across the coral barrier reefs and on to the beach or an enemy objective. No other landing craft in existence at this time could perform this mission successfully due to the natural obstacle the reefs imposed. The sister battalion of the amptracs was the amptanks, which generally had the mission of covering the landing waves of amptracs by preceding

the assault waves in to the beach. Both vehicles are similar in that they have the same capabilities in operating over land and water, the main difference being the tank is constructed with a turret mounting a 75mm howitzer and has more armor protection. This briefly covers the organization but will give the reader some understanding of the unit whose action is to be described.

As the 715th Amphibian Tractor Battalion was attached to the 8th Regimental Combat Landing Team of the Second Marine Division for this operation, its mission was to land two battalion landing teams abreast on the right half of the division beaches. The 2nd Battalion Landing Team was to land on the right and the 3rd Battalion Landing Team on the left. Company B of the 715th Amphibian Tractor Battalion had the mission of initially landing the assault echelon of the 3rd Battalion Landing Team on Green Beach I, then to return seaward and reloading, continue to land all remaining troops and equipment of the regimental landing team. (5)

NARRATION

DOG-DAY AND THE ASSAULT LANDING ON GREEN BEACH I.

From dawn until H-Hour on D-Day, naval gunfire was restricted to the beach areas to a depth inland of 1000 yards. Naval and marine aircraft also struck at previously designated targets along the landing beaches. This action prevented the enemy from reinforcing the beaches but was in no means completely effective in silencing enemy artillery and mortars. (6)

At approximately 0700 hours, the amptracs of Company B, loaded with the assault echelon of the 3rd Battalion of the Second Marine

(5) Personal knowledge

(6) A-1, p. 36

Division, rolled down the ramps of 4 LST's (Landing Ship Tank) and into the moderate sea approximately 6000 yards seaward from the shore. This point was known as the Discharge Area. Each landing craft was loaded with its particular designated infantry team and their organic weapons. Each craft was part of a predesignated wave.

The landing on Green Beach I was to be made in four assault waves. The first wave consisted of twelve amptracs with a platoon of five amptanks posed in the center of the wave. This wave was to go approximately 1000 yards inland after hitting the beach and remain there until the marines from the fourth assault wave had been landed and passed through, and then return seaward and continue the general mission of landing the remainder of the Regimental Landing Team. The amptanks were to precede this wave inland and from then on take their orders from the Battalion Landing Team Commander until released. The second wave consisted of twelve ~~amptracs all was to land five minutes after the first wave.~~ The third wave consisted of twelve amptracs and was to land eight minutes after the second wave. The fourth wave consisted of fourteen amptracs and was to land eight minutes after the third wave. Six amptracs of the third wave and the fourteen amptracs in the fourth wave were from Company C of the 715th Amphibian Tractor Battalion, but for the initial landing were under the command of company commander Company B. (7)

A navy LCP (Landing Craft Personnel) flying the Green Beach I flag met the amptracs at the discharge area and led them to the Rendezvous Area where the waves assembled and the boat teams took

(7) Personnel knowledge

their respective predesignated place in each wave. This area was about 1000 yards from the line of departure.

At approximately 0800 the Company Commander of the amptrac company gave the signal starting the first wave moving slowly to the line of departure. This move was scheduled so that the first wave would cross the line of departure at exactly 0815, thus ~~allowing it to hit the beach at H hour which was 0840. It would~~

~~take approximately twenty-five minutes to travel the 1250 yards~~ from the Line of Departure to the beach. In succession each wave moved out after the first at their prescribed interval. The sea was calm with just a little wind that roughed the water enough to cause about a four foot surf in toward the beach. This along with the smoke and dust caused by the naval shelling completely obscured the shore line itself. The only sight visible from this point was the hazy outline of the inland itself on the smoky skyline. As the first wave approached the LD (Line of Departure), the amptrac company commander from his position in the third wave could see that so far everything was going according to schedule. The four waves were the correct distance apart and had their right interval of approximately forty yards between landing craft. From time to time the amptrac company commander and the infantry company commander, who were in the same vehicle, used the 508 radio to contact the wave leaders and the infantry platoon leaders as a few of the amptracs ~~fell behind or momentarily got out of exact line. It was necessary~~ that the waves maintain positive lines and that individual landing craft maintain their positions in the wave as they crossed the line of departure. It was realized that once the enemy started their shelling, control would be extremely difficult and every effort must

be made to land simultaneously and in correct formation to provide the control desired on the beach-head, and to keep the Japs from concentrating on any one particular boat team as it hit the beach. The two LCC's (Landing Craft Control) on each flank guided the formation to the line of departure and the right flank of the first wave passed just to the left of the PC (Patrol Craft - designated as the central control vessel for Green Beach I and II) from which the amptrac battalion commander gave the signal to begin the run to the beach.

At exactly 0815 the first wave of amptracs commanded by 1st Lt. Robert Duncan crossed the line of departure and headed for Green Beach I on an azimuth of 108 degrees. At this time the amptrac company commander who was approximately 1200 yards behind the first wave could see a portion of the beach through the smoke and haze, and looking on an azimuth of 108 degrees could make out a high radio tower just inland from the beach. This was used as a guiding point and the wave commanders were told to guide the center of their waves on this tower and to land accordingly. As the third wave crossed the line of departure at 0828, the beach seemed strangely quiet and inactive as nothing seemed to be firing toward the first wave which was now approximately 1500 yards from the beach and beginning to cross the coral reef that was a natural barrier across the whole front. Waves about four feet high were breaking on the reef, but this did not hamper the move to the beach as the first wave crossed in good shape and kept in their formation. When the leading wave was approximately 800 yards from the beach, naval and marine fighters came in strafing the beach, and this attack continued along the beaches until the leading wave approached within 100 yards of the shore at which time the point of aim was moved inland.

(8)

(8) Personal knowledge

At the same time three LCI's (Landing Craft Infantry) which had preceded the landing waves, but because of the reef had to stop some 2000 yards offshore, continued firing 20mm and 40mm guns over the heads of the landing troops. Although each amptrac mounted four machine guns, all waves except the first had their fires masked and so did not fire. Except for the occasional thundering of the big naval guns far to the rear and the steady pom-pom of the guns from the LCI's, all was quiet on the beaches.

It appeared that the enemy had pulled away from the beach and that the landing was to be made with little or no opposition. Everything seemed rosy up to this point. The landing was going off in good shape, the waves were in perfect formation, and the weather was nice as usual in the Pacific.

Then the enemy opened fire. This happened as the first wave hit the beach and the third wave hit the reef 1500 yards seaward. Suddenly the entire reef seemed to be one mass of exploding mortars and big shells. A heavy barrage was laid down between the reef and the beach. Several amptracs took direct hits and went down. Men were blown into the water by direct hits and later picked up by the amptracs returning seaward. "A naval control boat commander who had been in on the Sicilian and Salerno Invasions said that the shelling upon assault waves was by far greater than that encountered by attack waves in either of the former two landings". (9)

All control that had persisted up to this point ceased. Nothing could be accomplished by radio as it was almost impossible to see anything, much less make contact with the other waves. Evidently the enemy fire was coming from positions 1000 to 2000 yards back of the beach. It was later established that this was true, most of the shelling coming from caves on and along the

ridges of Mt. Tapotchau, caves that contained artillery pieces on steel tracks that were moved up to the cave entrances, fired, then were pulled back into the caves and the sliding steel doors shut. Most of these caves were active until some days later when the infantry got to them and knocked them out with flame throwers or blasted them out with charges. Also artillery fire from Tinian Island, five thousand yards to the southwest, was falling along the beaches.

To get back to the first wave, as it hit the beach it was discovered that the beach was only about thirty feet in width, and directly to the front the terrain rose steeply to a height of four or five feet. Not only was this too high in most places for the amptracs to negotiate, but trees and thick brush constituted an unsurpassable obstacle in crossing the beach. Some attempted to get over this rise and a few got as far as five-hundred yards inland before they were permanently stopped by enemy fire or obstacles. Being lightly armored in the front and hardly any on the sides, the amptracs were good targets for small arms fire. Others seeing it was impossible to get inland at all, had to discharge their troops on the beach itself and get off quickly as the enemy concentrated their fire on the beach as the amptracs halted. Confusion reigned, as the amptracs could not turn around rapidly on the narrow beach but had to back away before making their turn. By the time the infantry jumped from the amptracs and got out their equipment, the second wave was upon them and the massing of vehicles and troops on the beach gave the enemy a target that was hard to miss. The enemy poured small arms fire from over the rise to the front keeping the infantry confined to the beach, and as the third wave approached they encountered a mass of troops on the beach. (10)

(10) Personal knowledge

In order not to run over the men on the beach most of the third and fourth waves had to discharge their troops short of the beach. Fortunately the beach sloped gradually seaward and as the water was only one to two feet deep, the infantry hit the water and made a dash for cover behind the small ridge to the front.

As each amptrac discharged it's infantry team, it immediately turned and headed out for more troops. Two LCS (Landing Craft Support) were stationed on each flank of the landing zone approximately 2000 yards seaward just off the reef. The battalion S-3 and executive officer of the amptrac battalion were on these craft for control purposes and to supervise the transfer of troops from the navy craft to the amptracs. (See Map C) Navy LCVP's, (Landing Craft Vehicle Personnel), had meanwhile picked up the remainder of the combat team at the transport area, and brought them to this point for transfer into the amptracs. The transfer was accomplished without much difficulty as there was little fire falling out in this area as the Japs were concentrating their fire on the beaches. No semblance of waves were formed at this stage of the operation as the only thought at this point was to load each amptrac with troops and ammunition as rapidly as possible and get them to the beach. As each amptrac was loaded it was rapidly dispatched by the control officer and sent to the beach. Some amptracs did not reach the control point as they returned from the beach because some of the numerous navy control craft ordered them to other beaches or assigned them other missions.

By noon the landing teams were about four-hundred yards inland and shore parties had supplies coming across the beach. (11)

(11) Personal knowledge

The amptracs continued hauling supplies from ship to shore, and those loaded with small arms ammunition carried their loads directly inland to the front line troops, as by this time the shore party had marked routes through the beach area. This mission was continued until after dark at which time the amptracs still in operating condition were taken aboard LST's for repairs.

Some continued to take in critical ammunition and supplies after dark, and as it was extremely difficult to find their parent LST in the darkness, some rode the sea throughout the night.

It was nearly noon the next day by the time a fairly accurate account of the company could be taken, and this report revealed that approximately twelve per cent of the company had been killed, wounded or missing, and the loss of approximately one fifth of the amptracs. The Second Marine Division's casualties for Dog Day amounted to well over one thousand men. One marine battalion had four different commanding officers in the first ten hours after the landing.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

1. TRAINING

Although the 715th Amphibian Tractor Battalion trained extensively with navy amphibian ships and control craft for several months prior to this operation, some difficulty arose between the LST's and the amptracs during the actual operation. Some of the LST's pulled far out to sea after discharging their amptracs. This resulted in the loss of some amptracs due to the fact that

they could not locate their ships at the end of the days mission. Others being in bad mechanical condition after the days operation, finally sank or drifted way off their sector and ended up on the reef several miles away, when they could not locate their parent LST's. A lot of this trouble can be contributed to the fact that while prior training was conducted with LST's of the navy, in the actual operation some Coast Guard LST's were assigned the mission of carrying the amptracs. Most of these ships had not worked with the amptracs prior to this time and lacked the experience needed in LST-LVT operations. For example, the loading of amptracs aboard LST's in itself was quite a problem, especially when the sea had any roughness at all, and a problem which the navy and the amptracs had continually experimented with until they found a satisfactory method of accomplishing this task. Lack of experience in the handling of amptracs by the LST's, caused the amptracs a great deal of unnecessary hardship.

2. CONTROL

Except for the period during the initial assault when control was practically lost as the waves encountered heavy enemy fire in reaching the beach, control was good considering an operation of this type. Some difficulty arose as to who was authorized to give orders to the amptracs at various stages of the landing. In some cases it was found that navy control personnel operating in small craft confused the issue by ordering individual or groups of amptracs on specific jobs that were not suitable or feasible for the amptracs to perform. In one case an amptrac was ordered several thousand yards seaward to pick up troops and consequently was lost for several hours. A navy small boat should have been assigned this task and

then the transfer of troops made to the amptrac at the transfer area.

It is felt that there were too many control boats running around giving orders and generally causing confusion and waste of effort.

3. INTELLIGENCE

It is believed that the first wave could have accomplished its mission of taking the troops 1000 yards inland had a better reconnaissance of the beach been possible. The unforeseen obstacle of impassable terrain that was encountered forward of the beach, caused confusion and resulted in casualties when the other waves closed in on the beached amptracs before they could turn around and get off the beach.

4. CAPABILITIES OF AMPHIBIAN TRACTORS

Small arms fire received as the amptracs hit the beach caused a few casualties before the infantry embarked from the vehicles. This in some cases was due to the lightly armored troop compartment of the amptrac which was not designed to stop any type of fire. Also those few amptracs that got past the beach and a little inland were stopped short of the phase line due to their poor armor protection.

5. REPLACEMENT VEHICLES

Due to the long sustained period of operation demanded by the mission, and to the fact that the amptrac cannot run continually for more than a few days without major repair and maintenance, the effectiveness of the amptrac unit to continually pour supplies onto the beachhead was materially reduced due to the number of vehicles out of operation and the unit having no replacement vehicles.

6. ARMAMENT OF AMPHIBIAN TRACTORS

This operation brought out the fact that too many vehicular weapons were mounted on the amptrac. Each amptrac had one 50 cal. machine gun and one 30 cal. machine gun mounted on the cab over the crew compartment, and one 30 cal. machine gun mounted on each side of the troop compartment. This made a total of four machine guns on each vehicle. Actually the only weapons that were fired in the landing were the two machine guns mounted on the cab of the vehicles in the first wave. The fire of the weapons in the following waves were masked. This was not only a needless employment of weapons, but the weapons mounted on the sides of each amptrac got in the way of the infantry as they jumped from the amptracs onto the beach.

7. SPEED OF THE AMPHIBIAN TRACTOR

This might be included under the capabilities of the Amphibian tractor but is considered important enough to be considered separately. As the top speed of the amptrac is approximately seven knots, the landing troops were under fire for a long period of time between the reef and the beach. The slow rate of speed for the amptrac does not allow any chance of maneuver or zigzagging, therefore it was just a case of plodding forward and let come what may. Perhaps this was worth the condition of not being stopped by the reef, as would be the case in an conventional landing craft, but never the less this factor contributed toward the high casualty rate.

LESSONS

1. Adequate prior training between LST's and amptrac units is essential to success in any amphibian operation. If possible

the same units who trained together should be attached together in the actual operation.

2. Control of amptracs is extremely difficult during the initial landing and all measures should be taken by competent authority to clarify duties of personnel on control craft.

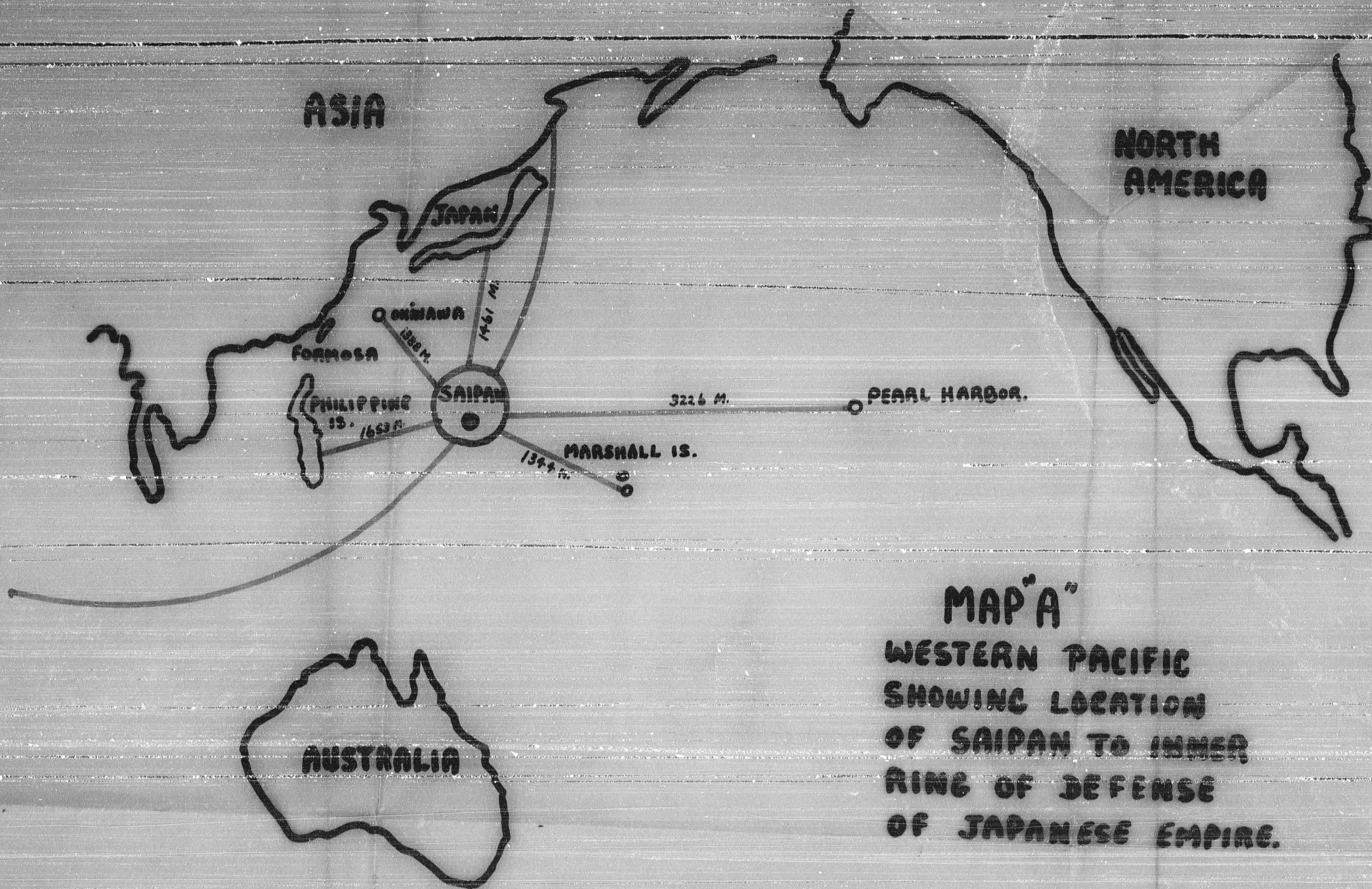
3. Alternate plans must be made to meet any situation that might arise and prevent the original plan from being carried out.

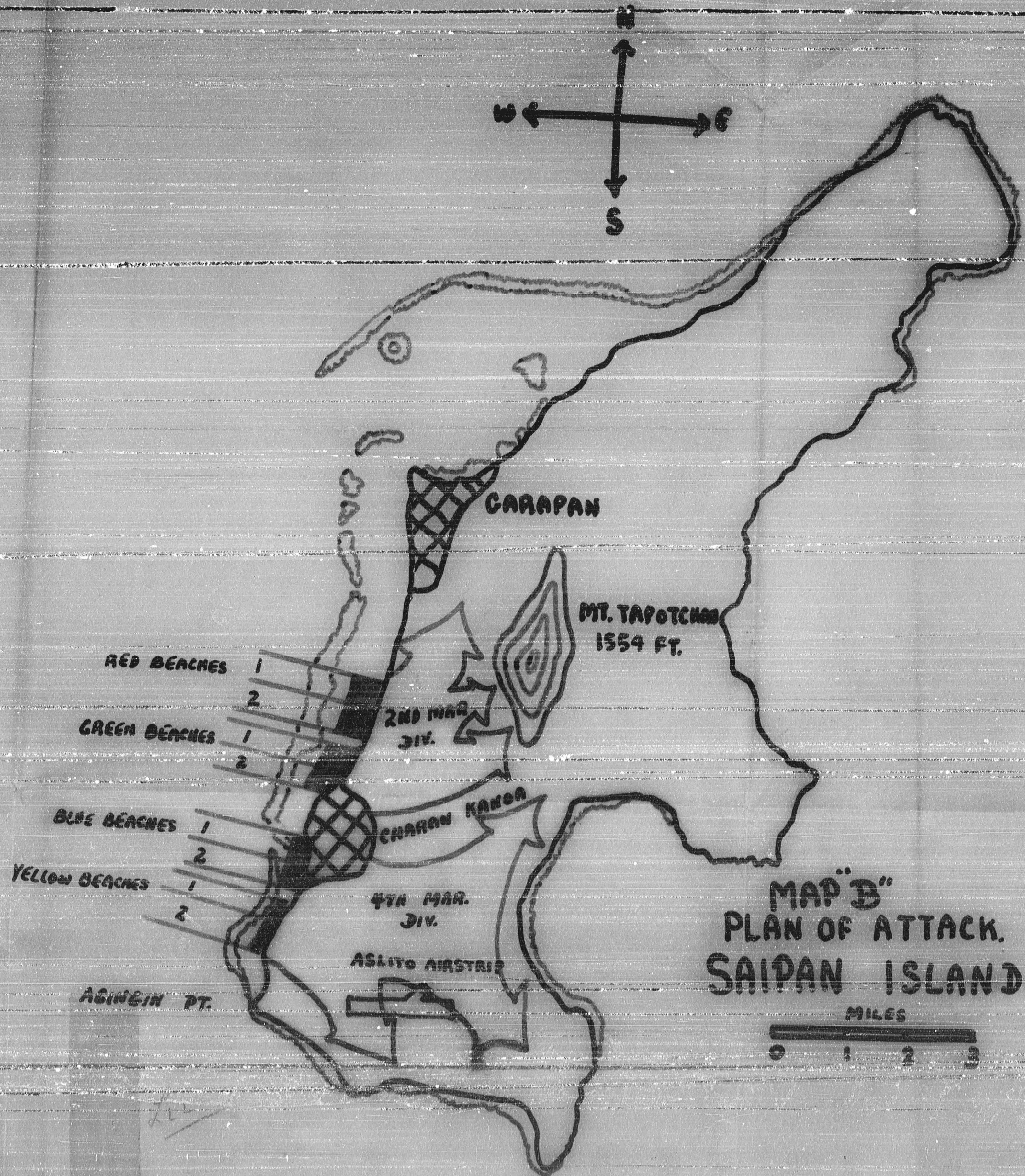
4. Amptracs do not have the armor protection needed to adequately protect transported troops from small arms fire.

5. The amptrac unit needs replacement vehicles to effectively maintain continuous supply support of assault troops.

6. One 30 cal. machine gun mounted on the cab of each amptrac is sufficient armament when the amphibian unit is used in an operation of this type.

7. The amphibian tractor is the slowest type of landing craft and should not be used to land assault troops except in cases where the landing has to be made across obstacles such as the coral reefs found in this operation.





SAIPAN

MAP "C" LANDING SKETCH

